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SUBJECT: NO SURPRISES AT RULING PARTY CONFERENCE

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs  
William R. Stewart, for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On November 1-3, nearly three thousand delegates participated in the annual conference of Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP.) Convened under the banner "New Thinking for Our Country's Future," the conference heard a robust-looking President Mubarak pledge to continue with economic reforms, even in the face of global financial difficulties. Overall, the major news of the convention was the announcement of the addition of likely 56 "female" seats to the People's Assembly before the 2010 parliamentary elections; a constructive step towards improving the participation of women in Egypt's legislative arena. The NDP leadership was unusually focused on the political opposition, clearly feeling the need to forcefully respond to its critics. The question of presidential succession, the elephant in the conference hall, remained unaddressed, despite much speculation prior to the conference that telling party leadership changes would be made. When asked in a press conference who the NDP's candidate would be in the next scheduled presidential elections in 2011, presidential son Gamal Mubarak testily replied that, "Does any country or party choose its candidate three years ahead of the election?" End summary.

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MUBARAK TAKES THE STAGE  
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¶2. (SBU) President Mubarak delivered the conference's opening address on November 1, pledging to continue with economic reform, even in the face of global financial troubles. "Reform policies have already yielded us several gains in the field of investment, export, and growth and job creation .... We are irreversibly implementing our (economic) platform, and ... we will not allow this global or any other crisis to undermine our commitment. We will continue opening our doors to local and foreign investment, and there will be no return to the past." Mubarak's speech highlighted the NDP's focus on "social justice," averring that, "Every Egyptian man and woman has the right to the fruits of reform and development .... We are giving top priority to the expansion of social justice." Mubarak pledged funding of approximately USD 660 million over the next three years for poverty alleviation and development programs for low-income areas throughout Egypt, to "help break the cycle of poverty."

¶3. (SBU) Mubarak also called for "enhanced participation" by Egyptian women in political life. To meet that goal, he promised that Egyptian law would be changed prior to the 2010 parliamentary elections, so that an additional number of seats specifically for women would be added to the People's Assembly. (Note: Mubarak did not specify how many seats would be added, but senior NDP member Kamal al Shazly told journalists that the increase would likely be two "female seats" per each of Egypt's 28 provinces, for a total of 56 seats to be added to the already 454-member assembly. Currently, there are only 8 female MP's. End note). Mubarak

also pledged that the government would pursue a policy of "enhanced decentralization," and that the law governing professional syndicates would be changed to better regulate these groups. (Comment: Many Egyptian professional syndicates are currently "frozen," and have been for years, due to the opposition Muslim Brotherhood having won the majority of seats on the boards of the organizations. The government is keen to better control the syndicate's elections, so as to prevent further MB-domination of these groups. End comment).

Mubarak also called for amending the legislative framework that regulates personal status matters (such as marriage, divorce, and child custody), so as to unify the different and sometimes contradictory clauses in the various laws that currently apply.

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TAKING ON THE OPPOSITION  
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¶4. (C) Through the three days of the conference, NDP leaders pointedly took on their opposition critics. Speaking under a sign stating, "We Promised, and We Delivered," NDP assistant secretary-general and presidential son Gamal Mubarak told the assembled delegates that the NDP would not "sink to the level" of opposition parties, whom he criticized for their "personal affronts to Egypt's leaders." Asserting that only the NDP has concrete policy plans, Gamal opined that, "The NDP has many ideas and policies that proved capable of achieving high growth rates. But others, while advocating reform, want to turn the clock back 30 or 40 years to enforce outdated policies that are suitable only for the past." In a subsequent press conference, Gamal dismissed reports that the

CAIRO 00002310 002 OF 003

opposition has no chance to express its opinions, noting that "Egypt has openness, through media outlets and various newspapers, as well as through sharp and open parliamentary debates." He called for strengthening the dialogue between all of Egypt's political parties.

¶5. (SBU) In his speech, NDP secretary-general Safwat El Sherif called on opposition parties to "raise the value of democracy," and stop what he termed, "political absurdism, speculations about the value of freedom, and excesses under the name of democracy." He insisted that opposition parties need to "take a look at themselves first before attacking the NDP, in the hopes of disguising their weaknesses, and distance from the Egyptian street." Ahmed Ezz, the NDP's secretary for organization, made thinly-veiled attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), saying that the NDP should not be called "authoritarian," but rather that, "this description should be applied to other illegal organizations under the command of a 'general guide' who gives himself the right to appoint and dismiss." Ezz was highly critical of the "failure" and "fragmentation" of opposition political parties, asserting that they have no popular appeal, while, "I tell them that it is the NDP that is a popular and mass party!" Ezz also singled out Gamal Mubarak in his speech, saying, "I thank Gamal Mubarak - he is the person who triggered our revolution of development and modernization!"

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THE OPPOSITION RESPONDS  
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¶6. (SBU) The MB was dismissive of the NDP's criticism, with Mohamed Habib, the MB's deputy supreme guide, telling journalists that, "It does not deserve a response. This conference is no different from any of their other conferences. What's new? All the talk about reform contradicts the realities faced by Egyptian citizens, such as unemployment, inflation, and health care, housing, and transportation problems." A joint statement was released by the opposition Wafd, Taggamu, Arab Naserite, and Democratic Front parties, stating the NDP's attacks on the opposition were an attempt to "cover up for the failure that is evident

in the regrettable policies applied by the NDP's consecutive governments." The statement noted that, "The amazing thing is that while the regime boasts that it is 'pluralist,' it is devoting all its efforts to imposing more restrictions on opposition parties .... It attacks them at the ruling party's convention that has monopolized all governmental media." Young activists who were not given necessary security permissions to convene an anti-NDP conference simultaneous with the party's convention instead held an on-line event, posting videos of various opposition leaders criticizing the government's policies, together with activists posting comments such as, "For 28 years, the NDP has been having the same talk. We have been listening to nonsense, we keep hearing about development that we do not see."

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PERSONAL DYNAMICS  
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17. (C) During his hour-long speech, Gamal Mubarak seemed far more self-assured and relaxed than in previous public appearances. Speaking in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, rather than more formal Arabic, his delivery was much smoother than in other recent speeches. An "old guard" versus "new guard" dynamic appeared to be in evidence during his speech, as NDP secretary-general Safwat El Sherif, who introduced Gamal, seemed to studiously avoid looking at him during the speech, shuffled papers incessantly while Gamal was speaking, and chatted with other NDP "old guard" members Zakariya Azmy and Mufeed Shehab, who were also sitting on the dais. In contrast, Ahmed Ezz (also on the dais) was fixated on Gamal, staring at him intently throughout the speech, and clapping enthusiastically at any opportunity. His applause always lasted longer than the others on the podium, and longer than the crowd's as well. Although the conference hall was packed during Gamal's speech, the applause afterwards was fairly brief, and there was no standing ovation.

18. (C) Ezz was at center-stage throughout the conference, working the conference hall with smiles and back-slapping, and managing conference details from personally ushering parliamentarians to their places when there was a seating problem to handing out copies of policy papers to delegates. Despite his ubiquitous presence, or perhaps because of it, several party members we spoke to were quietly critical of Ezz. They noted that his power is "overwhelming," with one NDP MP commenting that, "all of us NDP parliamentarians, we are scared of him, scared of what he can do to us if we cross him."

CAIRO 00002310 003 OF 003

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The question of presidential succession, the elephant in the conference hall, remained unaddressed, despite much speculation prior to the conference that telling party leadership changes would be made. When asked in a press conference who the NDP's candidate would be in the next scheduled presidential elections in 2011, Gamal testily replied that, "Does any country or party choose its candidate three years ahead of the election?" This key issue remains shrouded in uncertainty, as does the parallel question of whether the NDP's "old guard" or "new guard" has the upper hand within the party. Overall, the only significant policy news of the conference was the announcement of the addition of likely 56 female-specific seats to the People's Assembly, which will be a constructive step towards improving the participation of women in Egypt's legislative arena.  
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